

# Educating for Diversity in New Zealand: Considerations of Current Practices and Possible Pathways?

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## Abstract

This article reviews what the current practices are for educating students for diversity, and what considerations need to be made. New Zealand prides itself on being a diverse and inclusive society with bicultural foundations. Although all people have the right to an education free of bias and discrimination, the experiences of many disabled, minority, or ethnic groups, gender and sexually diverse students, and their families suggest that there is still a long way to go in educating for diversity. This literature review considers approaches to teaching that encourage diversity, and reviews certain factors that may need to be reconsidered by educators if we are to truly appreciate, and educate for, diversity. Through exploring possible pathways, teachers should understand the complex diversity of each student in their class, and how valuing this diversity can provide 21<sup>st</sup> century students and their communities with a diverse knowledge base, and willingness to work and collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds.

**Keywords:** *Diversity, Education, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Disability, Gender, Culture, Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, Minority Students, Identity.*



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## Introduction

As part of The Global Education 2030 Agenda, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2017, p. 7) defined *diversity* as “people’s differences which may relate to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, mental and physical ability, class, and immigration status”. This paper draws on this comprehensive understanding of diversity alongside a range of research, to consider what is being done, and what could be done to educate for diversity in New Zealand.

New Zealand is a multiethnic society with a population who are mostly *Pākehā* (New Zealand European), with the largest minority group being Māori (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). Following on from high unemployment rates in skilled migrants, and global security threats, the New Zealand Government set out to create a diverse, friendly nation that welcomes and supports all, and celebrates difference (Kolig, 2003, as cited in [Simon-Kumar, 2014](#)). The Ministry of Education (2007) reflects this image for the education system through its principles for educators to acknowledge, consider, and reflect a respect for inclusion, cultural diversity, and the Treaty of Waitangi through the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007).

In 2007, the New Zealand Government claimed that it was an inclusive society that led to New Zealand’s prosperity (Department of Labour, 2007), however, the literature reveals that current teaching practices vary widely, with certain schools

taking steps to specifically address topics around student diversity ([Burford, Lucassen, & Hamilton, 2017](#)), and evidence revealing that many students are still discriminated or excluded, even if unintentionally ([Major & Santoro, 2014](#); Stead, 2014). Current attitudes to diversity are portrayed through school cultures, and the discourse of educators. When these attitudes are negative, students and their families are left feeling unsupported and alone ([Purdue, 2009](#)), in contrast to the opportunities that arise for educators who incorporate and value diverse backgrounds and knowledge (Hindle et al., 2011). Through looking at international research alongside New Zealand research, a promising pathway to diversity comes through knowledge of self and students. Taking one’s own identity into consideration, and making a real effort to get to know students, could have a significant impact on student motivation, and student perceptions on diversity ([Maged, 2014](#); [Walrond, 2008](#)). Current education on diversity is often based on cultural diversity ([Hajisoteriou, & Angelides, 2015](#)), and fails to address the diversity within groups; the people who do not match their given labels, or fit the social norms.

## Current Practices and Considerations

### *Attitudes to Diversity.*

To educate and prepare students for diversity, schools and communities must seek to understand how the presence of wider societal attitudes within the school culture and environment assist or hinder an acceptance for diversity. Although children with



disabilities have as much of a right as any other student, many families still find the New Zealand education system discriminatory; it was the negative attitudes, and a lack of understanding shown by early childhood teachers towards disabled students' learning which caused great stress for parents (Purdue, 2009). These discriminatory and negative attitudes towards diverse students appear to continue through to secondary schools. For example, a Rainbow Youth Workshop in two Auckland Secondary Schools, aimed to promote acceptance and understanding of gender diverse students, reduce the associated bullying, and create a more supportive environment (Burford et al., 2017). The results from student questionnaires in this workshop revealed that many learners felt that their school culture would negatively impact on gender-diverse, and sexually-diverse students. Nevertheless, the students found the workshop to be highly beneficial, and for many, encouraged their desire to support peers who feel victimised or alone (Burford et al., 2017). Sousa and Lima (2017) highlighted how in Brazil, incorporating and valuing knowledge about the diverse ethnicities that make up the Brazilian people, from an early age, could be a vital step in creating cultures of belonging, inclusion and acceptance for cultural and ethnic diversity in the school and wider society. In New Zealand, this can be seen through certain schools that are using *Kaupapa Māori* (Māori cultural practices and views of the world) and bicultural experiences to implement the curriculum and to educate for diversity. Hindle et al. (2011) demonstrated how, by teaching the arts through the context of a *pōwhiri* (welcome ceremony), students would experience an integration of dance, drama, and performing for an audience in a familiar context, without following a Western tradition of separating art, music, dance, and theatre into separate disciplines (Anderson, 1996, as cited in Hindle et al, 2011). Such examples of incorporating education, experience, and understanding, reveals a possible pathway to improve attitudes towards diversity.

Attitudes to diversity may be portrayed in explicit or implicit ways through discourse and labels, which highlight difference in both positive and negative ways. The conversations that teachers have with, about, or in front of, their students, the way they respond to situations, and the attitudes that they deem praiseworthy, all contribute to the formation, and acceptance, of diverse learner identities, and the opportunities that students have to test out different ways of being (Major & Santoro, 2014). The term *special education*, although commonly used, suggests "that there was an education apart from, and different to, the types of education that other learners in schools received" (Bourke, 2006). Whether this has arisen to address the needs of diverse learners, or to support struggling teachers, the assumption that disabled children require a different or special education constructs the idea that children with disabilities are inferior and different from their peers (Bourke, 2006; Purdue, 2009). Because it is often expected that disabled students need special education, similarly students from minority cultures are expected to learn and communicate in English, regardless of their native tongue (Ballam, 2008). Although it may be fair to expect those new to a country to make an attempt at learning about the local language and customs, the literature recognises that such attitudes of expectation to become like the dominant culture fail to value diverse knowledge, experiences, and often result in poor academic or social outcomes (Ballam, 2008). Ballam (2008) also highlighted the need for educators to allow, and therefore

normalise, the use of multiple languages within the classroom, and seek ways of representing information not solely through language, so to improve attitudes towards diversity, and better the experience of diverse learners.

#### *Knowledge of Self and Students*

Knowledge of self and students is imperative in educating highly adaptable, connected 21st century citizens, who recognise and value diversity (Bolstad et al., 2012). An important consideration therefore, is how our expectations and experiences form our identities, and how knowledge of students provides a platform for understanding diverse approaches to teaching and learning. Walrond (2008) explored Caribbean education philosophy through Caribbean culture and education, and considered it necessary to acknowledge and implement aspects of this when teaching Caribbean Canadian students. The research presented a stark contrast between Caribbean teachers, who would take on an almost parental role, going to student homes to encourage students to come to class, providing assistance, caring for them and their wellbeing, in comparison with the typical Western teacher who says "come to me if you need help" (Walrond, 2008, p. 198). As such, knowing student and community expectations and being flexible in accommodating diverse needs is especially important for teachers from a dominant, able-bodied, and heterosexual Pākehā ethnicity; for such teachers, it is challenging to fully understand the ways in which teaching practice may implicitly discriminate, or negatively impact on learners and their achievement (Major & Santoro, 2014; Stead, 2014). Furthermore, knowledge of prior experiences and expectations for the role of a teacher or student, reveal the importance of a teacher's need to reflect and inquire into issues within a class, and collaborate with diverse members of the community, so to continually develop an inclusive practice, and actively respond to diverse learner needs (Bourke, 2006; Stead, 2014).

A willingness to understand oneself, and have a genuine interest in knowing students calls for teachers be aware of cultural taxation in their efforts to embrace and educate for diversity. Higher education institutions that fail to address the needs of culturally incompetent teachers, may factor in a Pre-Service Teachers (PST) unintentional cultural taxation due to lack of practical examples. Maged (2014) explored how PST are prepared for meeting the variety of learning needs in New Zealand's increasingly culturally diverse classrooms. Over the period of a four-year degree, the PST participants revealed that they had only had one compulsory course specifically on cultural diversity; the course lasted one semester and many students found it too theoretical. In this course, a Māori teacher educator acknowledged that people often see him as an expert in regards to working with Māori children, instead of realising that even if a PST is from the dominant culture, they can still address diverse needs showing respect, and making an effort to know all diverse students. Knowing how other students in the class see diverse peers provides a teacher with the agency to frame discussions and activities that address misunderstandings, and educate students for diversity in school and in their communities. Ethnic minority groups and refugees are often portrayed positively, as active citizens who are proud of their cultural diversity, and want to contribute positively and voluntarily to New Zealand society (Simon-Kumar, 2014). This is in comparison with minority

groups such as Pasifika families, of whom over half are represented as living in poverty (Veukiso-Ulugia, 2016), or disabled students who may rely on school resources to determine whether they are able to go to a certain school (Purdue, 2009). Diversity should not mean that such students have to prove themselves as worthy or as active citizens to be able to receive the same inclusive education as their peers; furthermore diversity certainly should not deny any assistance due to lack of an expert person or resource (Purdue, 2009).

#### *Diversity within Groups*

A common issue throughout the research is that there appears to be little evidence of educating about diversity within groups. Due to this, many minority groups face perpetuating stereotypes, and a struggle against the dominant social norms. Maged (2014) considered one issue in educating for diversity to be the lack of cultural and ethnic diversity amongst teachers, because this often does not align with the diversity within a classroom. Similarly, it has been recognised that, regardless of background, most students in New Zealand are in schools that represent the dominant mainstream ideas and values, which can significantly marginalise students, and hinder achievement (Hindle et al, 2011). A typical way to educate for diversity in schools is by celebrating different festivals, organising international potluck meals, or listening to music in different languages (Hajisoteriou, & Angelides, 2015). Although there is nothing wrong with including such aspects in school life, this can foster stereotypes and disregard the diversity among all students. Forty students in Cyprus were selected as part of a research on intercultural pedagogical practices in primary schools. Half of the students were Cypriot, and half were immigrants from Europe, the United Kingdom, and Asia. Many of the students interviewed responded to diversity in terms of cultural diversity, and felt discussions around this usually followed up incidents between native Cypriots and immigrants. Immigrant children saw these conversations as positive, however felt that they were teacher-led, and offered little opportunity for them to share their feelings or experiences – which they wanted to do (Hajisoteriou, & Angelides, 2015). Similarly, out of 33 secondary schools participating in *Te Kotahitanga* (a professional development programme to improve educational achievement of Māori students in English-medium secondary schools), 25% of the teachers were considered to be low implementers of culturally responsive pedagogies. These teachers, in largely Māori classes, missed opportunities to incorporate *Te Reo* (the language of the indigenous population), Māori content, or student perspectives and experiences (Hindle et al, 2011). The resulting contrast between self and other, heightens the likelihood of perpetuating stereotypes in schools. For example, a committee member and parent at a New Zealand early childhood centre questioned the need and appropriateness for a disabled child to be enrolled at a kindergarten even though it was made clear that the child had the right to attend (Purdue, 2009), and for Cypriot children who were friends with immigrants, they felt the need to justify their friendship choices because the school culture made them feel that such friendships were not normal (Hajisoteriou, & Angelides, 2015).

In contrast, Sousa and Lima (2017) revealed how in early childhood education, Brazilian teachers presented a mix of indigenous and Afro-Brazilian musical instruments to the class without specifying which instruments were indigenous, or Afro-

Brazilian. The children were able to test out the different instruments, and play along to various songs. It was only after the experimentation that the teachers specifically introduced the instruments, and explained that they are not commonly used instruments because they were made by indigenous and black people. In this way, the children were able to see the value in indigenous and Afro-Brazilian music and instruments, before they were confronted with the knowledge and wonderings around their society's history of devaluing them.

Being aware of social norms in New Zealand and abroad is important to consider when educating for diversity within groups. In Samoa, there are strict moral codes and traditional Christian-influenced values, which expect young people to uphold the family name, refrain from, and protect younger siblings from, sexual activities before marriage (Veukiso-Ulugia, 2016). Although Samoan migrant families may still hold traditional Samoan expectations for their children, research has shown that the attitudes and behaviour towards sexual health, for New Zealand-raised Samoan youth in particular, is becoming increasingly diverse. A survey of 535 Samoan secondary students revealed these changing attitudes for Samoan youth in New Zealand: 45% claimed to have had sexual intercourse, and two-thirds of these students stated that their first experience of sexual intercourse took place before they turned fifteen (Veukiso-Ulugia, 2016). When teachers do not consider or acknowledge the diversity within groups, and that not every student from a certain group is the same, there is a risk of hindering students' freedom to test out diverse ways of being. Major and Santoro's (2014) year-long case study between two classrooms, in two New Zealand primary schools, focused on two nine-year-old children; Beth, a South Korean girl, and Vincent, a Chinese boy. The teacher's construction that serious, hardworking female students are good and sensible reinforced Beth's knowledge of South Korean social norms. This caused her to hold the same expectations for herself as a learner in New Zealand and prevented her from being able to experiment with shaping her identity in a different way. In contrast, the strong Chinese values which were enforced in Vincent's home life did not align with the school expectations for students, and therefore allowed Vincent to be a loud and silly boy when he was at school. As such, it is vital that educators consider their own attitudes towards teaching and learning, and how these may support or hinder educating for diversity in New Zealand classrooms.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of the literature is that there is a range of New Zealand-based research regarding diversity. New Zealand's unique bicultural context no doubt contributes to the considerations that are being made regarding to educating diverse learners, for a diverse society.

The evaluation of the Rainbow Youth workshop was beneficial as it provided a student voice in regards to their gender and sexually diverse peers, however this came from secondary students and did not provide a follow up to evaluate any resulting impacts on the school environment and attitudes in the long term. It was not until 2015 that the Ministry of Education added a specific section for gender, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ) students into "Bullying prevention and response: A guide for schools" and

therefore this may still seem like a new issue for many educators (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Perhaps the most significant limitation, is that the current research divides diversity into specific categories, for example culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and so on; there appeared to be no research which looked at educating for diversity as a whole. Therefore, there is a gap in the research in regards to possible pathways for connecting effective practices and educating for diversity.

## Conclusion

This review of literature highlighted a range of contexts both in New Zealand and abroad to connect common practices, and to highlight factors that need to be considered when educating for diversity. The comparison of negative attitudes towards diversity, and efforts to incorporate diverse knowledge in the classroom, calls teachers to consider their own attitudes alongside those of the school and wider community. Through considering the impacts of these attitudes on students, and seeking to normalise, and value the diversity of each child, a possible pathway to educating for diversity can be seen. An important contribution to the literature was the research by Walrond (2008), who examined how western teachers failed to meet the expectations set by Caribbean teachers who provided parental and pastoral care to their students. This can easily be imagined in a New Zealand setting, and highlighted the importance of getting to know students and understanding oneself.

There is a gap in diversity research in regards to educating for a more comprehensive diversity, which is not separated into different categories, for example cultural or gender diversity. However, the various research on different types of diversity is an invaluable resource for creating connections between which practices work, and which factors need to be considered. In this way, when integrated, there are multiple potential pathways to work towards educating for diversity in New Zealand.

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